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Cotter to Leave Postal Service

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The postal official who stopped the CIA's mail-opening program is retiring from the Postal Service under congressional criticism that he allowed the illegal operation to continue too long.

William J. Cotter, the chief postal inspector, is taking early retirement for health reasons, Postmaster General Benjamin F. Bailar said Wednesday. Postal officials said the early retirement has been under discussion for months and is unrelated to the mail tampering controversy.

Bailar's announcement came four days after the chairman of a House Post Office subcommittee released a letter to Bailar urging the postmaster general to fire Cotter.

Cotter came to the Postal Service in 1969 after 18 years with the Central Intelligence Agency, during which he knew of the mail surveillance program. His actions with the Postal Service resulted in the end of the mail surveillance in 1973.

Rep. Charles H. Wilson (D-Calif.), whose subcommittee is investigating the mail surveillance program, wrote, "Mr. Cotter is obviously a capable and dedicated public official, but unfortunately his dedication is first and foremost to the CIA, not the Postal Service."

Cotter was unavailable for comment. Wilson criticized Cotter for failing to reveal the existence of the CIA program.

"When I first raised the question of mail surveillance back in 1973, Mr. Cotter should have come forward and revealed the existence of the project to the subcommittee, but he did not," Wilson wrote. CIA Director William E. Colby publicly disclosed the existence of the program earlier this year.

Wilson said his subcommittee has been told of an agreement when Cotter joined the Postal Service "that he would not be asked to reveal any knowledge he gained as a CIA agent, regardless of whether such knowledge would hamper his ability to execute his postal responsibilities."

Wilson also charged that Cotter misinformed Congress about his knowledge of the mail openings. Cotter told another congressional panel that he had "no official awareness of the mail surveillance" after he left the CIA project in December, 1955. "The Rockefeller report reveals that this assertion is false," Wilson wrote.

Wilson told the postmaster general that "the contradictions in Mr. Cotter's testimony should be of some concern to you."